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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses several factors in providing high quality day care for school-age children. It is argued that parents have the power to influence public policy regarding provision of school-age day care services through voting, and that there is much more community support of day care when it is perceived as a program to serve all families, not just the traditional low income families. Further, public support for housing day care programs in existing school buildings is high because it provides a good reason for not closing down neighborhood schools that have declining enrollments. It is important that day care be structured as a child development program and not as a custodial service. (Author/SS)

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Some Ingredients of Effective School-Age Child Care

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Day care for the school-age child means different things to different people. For those who do not have children or do not need day care, it often means a way to keep the child of working parents from milling around the school in the morning or from getting into trouble in the afternoon. For many parents and educators it means some way of monitoring the child's activities, some way of making sure the child doesn't get hurt, or hurt others, or damage property before the parent gets home from work. For early childhood professionals (and there doesn't seem to be a word or phrase commonly accepted for those of us who provide day care for the school-age child), it means a planned program in a well-equipped, comfortable and safe setting that will allow the child to create, to explore and to choose stimulating and diverse activities with other children under the guidance of trained, competent and caring adults. For some school officials and parents, it presents an opportunity to meet a community need by using school buildings which might otherwise be closed due to declining enrollment.

I have been asked to discuss some of the public policy issues and practices that we have found to be instrumental in providing school-age day care. First of all, let me say that at present school-age day care is increasingly receiving wide support from the public. (In the six years that we have provided this service, our programs have grown from eight to twenty-s9x and we now provice care for handicapped children ages five to twenty-one.) I believe that public support will continue to grow. Below, I have listed a number of factors which allow us to continue to provide what we hope is high quality day care for the school-age child within the public sector.

1. The Political Power of Parents. While we all know the statistics show a phenomenal growth in the percentage of working mothers, statistics do not vote. Parents vote, and politicians listen to voters. School-age day care is winning support from once reluctant locally-elected officials because they are responding to their constituents. In our county (a large suburban-urban area with a population of over 600,000), placing extended day care directly under the control of the County Supervisors almost guarantees its existence and growth. This year the elected officials enthusiastically agreed to fund five additional programs. I no longer have to convince politicians with statistics, stories of neglected children, or child development principles. The parents are doing the convincing.

2. Widespread Need, Widespread Access. Day care is not a poverty program. Parents who need day care come from all social and economic backgrounds. There is much more community support for day care when it is perceived as a program to serve all families, not just the traditional low income families. Admittance to our program is on a first-come, first-served basis, and low income families pay on a sliding fee scale. All other families pay the full fee. Since the parents are paying for the service, they feel entitled to it.

3. Use of Available Space. Because many school systems are facing rapidly declining enrollments, space to house day care programs is becoming available within the schools. While the school system may not want to administer day care (for fear it would inflate the school budget), many communities find publically assisted day care very attractive. It provides a good reason for not closing down the neighborhood school.

4. A Child Development Orientation. Many people, including parents, elected officials and administrators, may consider day care as only a custodial service. It is, however, very important--both for the welfare of the children and for the success of the program--that it be structured from the be-

ginning as a child development program. Children who have been in school all day and must stay in the same building until 6:30 in the evening need special attention. They need a comfortable room with a space they can call their own. They need adults who aren't too busy to talk to them. They need adults who know how to plan interesting activities and how to help children plan for themselves. They need nutritious snacks they can help prepare for themselves, and they need materials and equipment to carry out their ideas. Therefore, those responsible for the program should have a solid professional background, either through education or relevant experience or both.

While parents may not at first demand a professionally run program, once they experience it they will help to make sure that the quality is not reduced. It is hard to change the character of a program after it has been accepted and established. Parents who have been led to expect only custodial care will accept it. However, if their children have been in a child-centered, stimulating program, they will not settle for less.

This leads me to my last point. There is very little training, either academic or otherwise, for the school-age day care teacher and it is very difficult to find persons who have had academic training or work experience in this area. This conference should be a help in that direction.

As both the need for and the number of school-age day care programs grow, we will experience even more than we do now the lack of appropriately trained staff. Our program has an extensive orientation and staff development component, but it is not enough. A major challenge remains to provide the appropriate education for those who plan to become extended day care teachers and supervisors.